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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses: (1) the importance of building a comprehensive web of support for families in family literacy programs (such as Even Start) that communicate consistent values and messages essential for educational success; and (2) how integration of program components can be developed and strengthened. The paper is organized around four major principles. For each principle, practical examples illustrate how the theories would be implemented in program practice. Principle 1 focuses on identifying family needs and building services around those needs. Principle 2 identifies intense experiences and a high degree of connection across services as a key to changing family attitudes and perspectives in lasting ways. Principle 3 involves providing continuity through a set of common messages and values presented and reinforced in all program components. Principle 4 specifies that integration requires connections across program components. The five implications of these principles for program design and management are: (1) the need for increased planning time; (2) building and nurturing a strong staff team; (3) the need for cross-staff training; (4) a supervision style that extends the web of support to staff; and (5) developing integrated approaches and common messages across various collaborators. The paper concludes with a list of resources. (Contains 23 references.) (KDFB)

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Integration

Making the Pieces Fit

BY M. CHRISTINE DWYER, RMC RESEARCH CORPORATION AND
BONNIE LASH-FREEMAN, NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY LITERACY

One in a Series of Papers for Even Start Project Managers

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Integration

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High quality family literacy programs demonstrate every day that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; that is, they are organized to offer families something much greater than the individual services of early childhood, adult education, and parenting components. We use the label integration to describe that value-added and elusive characteristic of the best programs. ***Integration is a way of designing education and support services for families that builds on and replicates the interdependence of family members.***

Successful Even Start programs build a comprehensive web of support for families who are working toward the goals of self-sufficiency and self-determination. At the heart of the web of support constructed by family literacy programs are consistent values and messages that are essential for educational success. Integration of components occurs as staff from separate program service areas work together with families in a variety of ways to build and reinforce that web of support, values, and messages.

This paper discusses the importance of building a web of support for each family and explores ways that integration of program components can be developed and strengthened. A basic rationale for integrating components is the knowledge that an intense experience is needed to change intergenerational patterns associated with low literacy. A strong team effort is required to motivate families to alter the circumstances of their lives and to sustain them as they take the risks to undertake transformational changes.

The topic of integration is a challenging one that is based on a theoretical framework grounded in a set of principles about families and development. The organization of this paper is structured around four major principles. For each principle, practical examples are provided to illustrate how the theories would be implemented in program practice. The paper concludes with a series of implications for program design and management.

FOCUS ON FAMILIES

Integration begins with a focus on families: families identify their needs and services are built around them; designing services at the family level requires a high degree of connectedness across services.

Where we belong, we learn. Where we are supported, we learn to support others. When we are treated with respect, we learn to appreciate others. Family-focused programming is built on the value of an appreciation of the strengths and capabilities of

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all families. The goals, interests, and needs of families and their individual members are the starting places for design of successful family literacy services. Family literacy programs recognize that parents must first develop in themselves what they need to transfer to their children: self-confidence, the value of education, and a vision of a successful person.

Basic to the notion of integration is that families are the units of learning and the transmitters of educational values. Values incubate within family systems and are transferred to family members. For example, the value of persistence in pursuing goals is taught to and observed by children when they know their parents are learning new skills and strategies. Family literacy programs focus on the transfer of educational values from parents to children. Education produces changes and change affects each member of the family. As individual family members develop and change, all other members of the family are affected. Even Start staff are sensitive to changes and continuously develop strategies to involve other family members.

Because each family is different, Even Start programs must shape program services to match families, and not fit families to the program. Each family presents a different combination of strengths and needs—and those are ever-changing—requiring that family literacy programs develop a high degree of individualization and operate with great flexibility. Some family literacy programs use individual Family Action Plans as a way to recognize the importance of individualizing services and begin to organize the information that staff will need to support the families in the program.

FAMILY ACTION PLANS

Family action plans identify and match the goals of families with specific program services. In programs collaborating with Head Start, the Head Start Family Needs Assessment might be the starting place to develop the action plan. In adult education, the learner's poltfolio might be a starting place. Because planning has probably not been a natural part of the lives of families served by family literacy programs, the development of a Family Action Plan may seem like an overwhelming task. While the structure of a formal plan may provoke anxiety at first, eventually the plan will become a source of security for the family. Here are some guidelines to remember in the development of Family Action Plans:

- Develop a knowledge of the family and a trusting relationship before developing a Family Action Plan. Practice identifying goals and breaking projects into simpler steps with less personal matters before tackling the Family Action Plan.
- One staff member should work with the family to develop the plan. Other staff can be involved at the discretion of the family.
- Completing the plan takes some time; the family will need to think about the plan and may want to consult with other family members and relatives.
- If goals are unrealistic, explore the choices and outline steps so that parents can choose the best strategies. Remember that families are responsible for their plans, not staff members who play a supportive role in family progress. (NCFL, 1994; Dunst, 1988)

Staff from successful family literacy programs see themselves as a team working together to support individual families; each family is seen as a point of service for the collective team of core component staff members, i.e., early childhood, adult education and parenting staff, and the staff from supporting collaborators.

INTENSITY AND CONNECTION

Transformative change requires intense experiences: a high degree of connection across services is needed to change attitudes and perspectives in lasting ways.

Many families must make major changes in their lives in order to accomplish even modest goals. In addition to acquiring strategies and skills, family members need to build self-confidence and may need to change perspectives, values, and habits of thinking that are out of sync with a newly developed vision of themselves as self-sufficient, not only in economic terms but also in the ability to develop competencies and envision strategies for next steps.

In early research on family literacy programming, Hayes found a pattern of characteristics of families in the target population for family literacy that suggests some of the perspectives and education-related values that may need to change. He noted that parents often had little understanding of their role in the education of children. They viewed school learning as something that belonged to "others" and had little value for them in contrast to common sense. Further, adults had no history of setting goals for themselves or working to accomplish goals (Hayes, 1991). Changing such attitudes is much more difficult than simply learning new literacy or vocational skills—and most families in family literacy programs must work in all arenas. Changing attitudes requires an approach that is qualitatively different from most training currently provided by adult education or vocational programs.

To build strategies and skills *and* also change a family's perspective takes a great deal of time and attention in a supportive environment. It may take several years of intense experiences in a family literacy program for a family to achieve even a modest degree of self-sufficiency or the confidence that they will some day attain self-sufficiency. After all, an adult family member may have been surrounded with discouraging messages for twenty or thirty years prior to entering a family literacy program; those attitudes are not going to be changed in a few months or through occasional contact.

Every contact that the family literacy program has with the family is an opportunity to reinforce developing attitudes; in this delicate relationship with a family in transformation there is no room for lost opportunities or mixed messages. It is critical that staff in all program components operate with the same philosophy and provide consistent reinforcement to scaffold a family's developing attitudes and values. At one level, integration of components means delivering consistent messages in all contacts with a family, surrounding a family academically and socially. That challenge requires a high degree of staff interchange about individual families and a solid commitment to a well-articulated set of common values and messages.

Thus, a critical task of all Even Start programs is to engineer the degree of intensity of services for each family that can really make a difference—providing consistent reinforcement for educational values across all the components and services that engage families and keeping them engaged with services long enough to affect real and lasting changes toward developing the educational values.

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PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Mezirow has identified the stages that adult family members will pass through as they develop new transforming perspectives:

- Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
- Examining self and assessing present status
- Looking at the personally internalized role assumptions and comparing with new goals
- Sharing discontent with the status quo
- Exploring options for new ways of acting
- Building competence and confidence
- Planning and goal-setting
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plans and accomplishing goals
- Trying out, experimenting with new roles, and assessing feedback
- Reintegrating into society as a "different person" (Mezirow, 1978)

Remember that family members in family literacy programs may be transforming perspectives related to many aspects of their lives at the same time: their role within their birth family, role as a parent, role as a spouse or partner, role as a worker, and role as a competent adult. They need a consistent set of values and messages that work to support their growth and development in the multiple roles they play.

Program staff can develop strategies to support adults as they come to view themselves as a "different person" including:

- daily reinforcement of successes and attempts;
- teaching problem-solving techniques and encouraging parents to use these with ongoing issues, beginning with simple issues and working towards tougher problems;
- biweekly or monthly parent conferences that emphasize the different roles of student, parent, spouse, citizen, etc.;
- rituals and ceremonies to elaborate success;
- ongoing academic connections to vocational goals;
- relating the curriculum to day-to-day applications;
- debriefing parent-child activities to elicit new learnings in child development and parenting; and
- providing concrete markers of transitions such as certificates of attendance, or incentives for goal achievement.

As staff understands more about the primary messages and values of family literacy, they can develop additional strategies to nurture family development.

COMMON MESSAGES AND VALUES

Continuity is grounded in a set of common messages: components are integrated when they present and reinforce the same set of values.

A successful Even Start program defines and articulates a set of educational principles by which the program operates. Those principles are the foundation for the core set of values or messages that all program staff use to guide their interactions with families and to design growth experiences and supports for family members. These foundational messages are a combination of values, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions that are cultural norms associated with lifelong learning.

This common core of messages provides a critical link across the experiences of family members; as family members are exposed to new experiences, their learnings are reinforced through interactions with other family members who have had complementary experiences. For example, as a parent builds her own sense of self-esteem through reflecting with a staff member on her own achievements in mathematics, her young child is learning to review and record his accomplishments in kindergarten—and, especially powerfully, the parent is encouraged to engage her son in the same review and praise his specific new developments. The parent is learning to develop in herself what she must give to her child.

While it is important that staff in each program spend some time as a team developing a set of core messages, there are several statements of educational values that are likely to appear on most lists such as:

- Growth and development depends on opportunities and experiences.
- High expectations bring high achievement.
- Values are transmitted intergenerationally.
- All families have strengths from which they can build.
- Parents have the central role to play in a child's development.
- Planning and setting goals are basic to attaining goals.

While families will differ in the focus and intensity of attention to education values, core messages such as these can be the starting place for working with families and other staff members to plan the experiences that will help attain families' goals. For example, at a team meeting, an adult educator and early childhood teacher can find ways that they both can stimulate family members to ask questions to seek information or to break down a complex task into component parts.

Messages at a finer level of detail will be even more useful as staff from different components and collaborators work together to understand how a particular message might be reinforced.

FOUNDATIONAL EDUCATIONAL MESSAGES

The following list of messages at different levels might provide a useful starting place for a discussion among staff members from different components:

- It takes practice to attain mastery.
- We need to take care of things we value.
- Asking for help when you need it enables learning.
- Establishing routines makes life easier and helps you to accomplish more.
- Learning involves asking questions and seeking information.
- Applying what is learned in one situation to another (transfer of skills) is a key to flexible thinking.
- Creating and inventing are essential to developing other thinking skills.
- Observing and noting patterns are a basic thinking skills.
- There are lots of solutions to any problem.
- There are lots of different ways to be smart.
- Listening to the ideas of others is a good way to learn.
- We can learn much from stories to apply to our own lives.
- We develop talents and interests through experience and participation.
- There are ways to make friends, e.g., being interested in others, sharing interests, etc.
- Finishing things that you have started provides a sense of satisfaction.
- Working with others requires give-and-take.
- It is possible to express your ideas and emotions in many different ways and through different media.
- Seeking variety and diversity opens up new experiences.
- Competence with print literacy makes our lives easier and more enjoyable.
- We can learn to make good decisions by making choices/ expressing preferences and experiencing the consequences. (Dwyer, 1995)

When the concept of integration becomes concretely articulated in a set of messages, integration becomes a way of living and working for family literacy program staff members.

CONNECTIONS ACROSS COMPONENTS

Integration requires connections across program components.

There are many opportunities for making specific connections across components and among collaborators in Even Start programs and there are a variety of ways in which those linkages can be made. Perhaps the most critical connections are those linking the parenting components (i.e., parent groups, parent-child interaction, home visiting) to each other and to other aspects of family literacy. The following are examples of how such specific connections might occur:

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- parent group time is used to address questions and issues that arise during home visits and parent-child interaction times;
- the activity of home visits is based on current activity in the early childhood setting, the goals of adult learners, and the activity of parent-child interaction time;
- parent-child activities and home visit activities are designed with ideas for ease of transfer to home for practice;
- the home visit is used to practice an application of what has been discussed in parent groups;
- the home visit encompasses every aspect of the family literacy program; and
- parenting education material is the focus of adult literacy activities.

Other critical linkages are based on the literacy goals of the various components. Examples of connections across components that have literacy as a focus are:

- both home visits and parent groups have a literacy focus;
- literacy skills for adults are taught in the context of early childhood development, parenting, and use of community resources;
- planning for parent-child interaction time is used as a subject of study in adult education classes; and
- staff connect what young children are learning to education skills in later learning, including adult education.

At one level, integration means the connection of the curricula of the family literacy program components of adult education, early childhood education, parent education, home visits, and vocational exploration. In fact, when components do not connect in the specific ways described above, they often simply become a duplication of the services already available in most communities.

DEVELOPING LINKAGES

When staff meet to develop connections across components, there are various starting points that can be used to develop linkages: connections can be based on values and attitudes (as discussed above), or meaningful themes (e.g., celebration of diversity, seasonal changes), or particular activities of interest (e.g., a visit to a museum, cooking with children), or learning strategies (e.g., asking questions for information, organizing and ordering information), or problems and events that are of immediate concern (e.g., safety in the neighborhood following an incident, difficulty in getting a child ready for school). (Dwyer, 1996)

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

Programs that seek to empower families to function independently assume the responsibility for creating comprehensive approaches to services. Family focused services must emphasize "a reasonable balance between families' basic survival needs, parents' personal adjustment and development, and children's developmental needs" (Weiss and Halpern, 1990). Thus, the very design of Even Start programs takes into consideration an array of services responding to family goals and needs. All

workable designs include adult education, early childhood services, and parenting support. All designs collaborate with community agencies and all provide some services in the home. All designs are intense and continue over time. In addition to the above broad guidelines, there are some specific practical program design and management issues that must be addressed within the context of integration: planning time, team work, staff development, and supervision.

1. Integrating services and messages takes planning time. It is essential to set aside time for staff from different components and collaborating staff to work together as a team. Teamwork is essential to integration and provides the basis for connecting the components. As staff members talk with each other in planning for individual families, they are articulating key messages about family literacy and integration and strengthening the web of support for families. Integration becomes a way of working instead of an abstract idea.

   All staff require paid planning time to create the connections that make families' program experiences meaningful and powerful. The full team of staff will need to meet at least weekly for joint discussion and planning of academic and social development. Program design and staffing plans must accommodate this need for planning time; a common model is to provide services four days a week and allow one day for planning across and within staff teams.
2. It is vitally important to build and nurture a strong team of staff. Ingredients in shaping an effective team include solid information for each staff member about family literacy, an opportunity to participate in shaping the program's goals and messages, a chance to learn about other staff members' talents and abilities and cultural backgrounds, and clarity about roles and responsibilities.

   Each week's planning time offers the opportunity to strengthen the bonds among team members. It is critical that all staff honor the planning time and not use the day to schedule other appointments. Teamwork is enhanced if leadership for meetings is shared and time limits for different segments observed. Including staff from other collaborators and parents in the planning process enhances effectiveness. The outcomes of planning meetings should be documented as part of the self-evaluation process.

SUGGESTED WEEKLY PLANNING AGENDA

The National Center for Family Literacy suggests the following meeting outline to ensure conversation about all aspects of the program.

- Begin with an overview of the previous week with each staff member contributing to the discussion. Observations about families are a key part of this discussion.
- New information that impacts the program is shared by all.
- Conduct an evaluative discussion about the growth and development of the overall program. It is very important for frontline workers to be able to reflect on the big picture.
- Discuss strategies, themes, and concepts for curriculum in the coming week.
- Each member takes some time to develop a specific plan and then shares those to identify points of intersection with others. (NCFL, 1994)

3. The challenge of integration brings forth some specific staff development needs. In addition to the competencies expected for providing services in the component areas, there are cross-staff training needs that are likely to occur. Topics that repeatedly surface include conflict management, motivation theory, family systems theory, understanding change and transformation of perspectives, strengths-based approaches, setting boundaries, curriculum development strategies, and development of self-awareness and reflection. As these topics suggest, it is important to help staff comprehend the inner struggle that leaders of families are going through and find ways to help them adapt attitudes and behaviors.
4. Supervision in an integrated program requires a style that replicates the family/staff interaction style and extends the web of support to staff. Because family literacy staff are expected to change their own ways of thinking, doing, and knowing, they require encouragement and time to find their place within the program. A successful supervision approach for integrated programs is a mentor/coach relationship in which supervisor and staff member examine behaviors, reflect on them, and plan to change, as necessary. Reflection on both parts is a key element of the process. Family literacy program supervisors who observe staff and support staff in a reflective way model strategies and attitudes that staff will find essential when working with families.
5. One of the special challenges of Even Start is to develop integrated approaches and common messages across various collaborators. It is a special responsibility of Even Start to work with collaborating service providers to improve the quality and appropriateness of services. There may be cases, however, in which the educational values or quality of service delivery differ so much from the core messages of Even Start that collaboration is not desirable. In those situations, the Even Start program may need to provide the services with its own resources.

Because successful family literacy staff believe in the high potential of families, they combine the messages surrounding the value of education and belief that every family can make decisions and choices about their lives to provide a foundation for the design of the family literacy program. It is the program design — families at the center, supportive staff, interdisciplinary curriculum, and collaborative partners — that surrounds families with a system that gives them time and attention as they develop skills and strategies leading to self-determination and interdependence.

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Resources

Enabling & Empowering Families: Principles & Guidelines for Practice. By Carl Dunst, Carol Trivette, and Angela Deal. 1998. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

The material described in this book has evolved from seven years of research and clinical work. It was specifically written for early intervention practitioners who are being asked to work with families but do not have extensive training in family systems. Numerous empirical investigations have found that events both within and outside the family impinge on the success of early intervention efforts. This book identifies a set of four principles that can be used to meet the needs of family members in a way which increases the likelihood that early intervention will have positive effects on child, parent, and family functioning.

Empowering Families. By Moncrieff Cochran, Christiann Dean, Margaret Ferritti Dill, and Frank Wollever. 1984. Ithaca, NY: Family Matters Project, Cornell University.

This workshop series is designed to help human service workers and other professionals identify, acknowledge, and reinforce the strengths inherent in the families they work with and enhance their ability to communicate with these families. The workshops are designed to build individual and group process skills of professionals based on the philosophy that parents are experts about their children and should be encouraged to have "power" in structuring their own success and that of their children. Many of the skills promoted in this series have broad professional and personal value, such as values identification, empathy, listening, brainstorming, etc., and might be valuable to many types of support groups.

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Guide to Quality: Even Start Family Literacy Programs. By M. Christine Dwyer. 1996. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research.

This guidebook describes quality indicators for ten elements of Even Start programming including integration of components, collaboration, transition as well as adult education, home visiting, parenting, and early childhood services. The indicators are drawn from research, evaluation studies, the theories of family literacy, and the wisdom of practice. Also included are troubleshooting signals for each element and vignettes that translate indicators into practice. The indicators are organized in workbook format to use in program self-reviews.